



Mayor's Task Force on the Future of the Strand Theatre: Benchmarking Research Findings

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Agenda

- Methodology and participation
- Mission
- Restoration and renovation
- Programming
- Community involvement
- Surrounding area
- Relationships
- Board and staff composition
- Financials
- Best practices
- Implications for Strand Theatre



Methodology

- Two uniform protocols, one full-length, the other a short version, developed by TDC in concert with the Task Force, was used to guide each interview.
- For each theatre, a representative of TDC conducted a 45- or 20-minute telephone interview with the theatre's Executive Director.
- The results were used to generate this segment of the presentation.
- Potential benchmark theatres were suggested by the League of Historic American Theaters and members of the Task Force.

Participation

■ Non-profit Theatres

- ☐ Columbia Theater of Hammond, LA
- ☐ Edward C. Smith Civic Center of Lexington, NC
- ☐ Merrimack Repertory Theater of Lowell, MA
- ☐ Paramount Center for the Arts of Bristol, TN
- ☐ Apollo Theatre of New York, NY

■ For-profit Theatres:

- ☐ Forrest Theatre of Philadelphia, PA

■ Six out of twelve suggested theatres participated in the project.

Mission

- Key words from non-profit theatre missions include:
 - *“Improve the region’s quality of life...”*
 - *“Expose young people to theatre...”*
 - *“Enhance the educational, cultural and economic efforts of...its surrounding region...”*
- The one for-profit theatre interviewed exists to put on touring Broadway shows and has minimal involvement with the community.

Restoration and Renovation

Theatre	Restoration Date	Cost	Work Done
Apollo Theatre of New York, NY	On-going	\$54M	The restoration currently underway will give the Apollo a new roof and HVAC system. The marquee and "blade sign" will be replaced, and the administrative offices, gift shop, lobby, proscenium, dressing rooms and auditorium spaces will be refurbished and made ADA compliant.
Columbia Theater of Hammond, LA	2002	\$5M	The project involved gutting the original Columbia Theater and joining the two adjacent buildings to the remaining shell. The City of Hammond then constructed an 850-seat theatre with fly space, dressing and green rooms, large wings, a spring floor and heavy winches for performances requiring aerial work. Administrative offices and a conference center were also added.
Paramount Center for the Arts of Bristol, TN	1991	\$2.5M	The project involved enlarging the stage, adding a fly tower, creating three floors of dressing and green rooms for rehearsals and storage space.
Forrest Theatre of Philadelphia, PA	1997	\$200K	The project involved redecorating the Forrest's lobby and improving the seating in the auditorium by making it handicapped accessible.
Edward C. Smith Civic Center	1999	N/A	The project involved installing a state-of-the-art lighting system and a hydraulic orchestra pit.
Merrimack Repertory Theater	1986	N/A	Basic restoration of the theatre space.

Programming

- In terms of programming, the theatres in the benchmark fell into three distinct categories:
 1. Theatres that tailor their programming to their surrounding community.
 2. Theatres that offer programming that has intellectual or artistic merit as part of a larger mission to educate their audience.
 3. Theatres that offer one type of programming and are known for it.
- Theatres that tailor their programming to the surrounding community do so in such a way as to appeal to their region rather than simply the area immediately around the theatre.

Community Involvement

- In terms of community involvement, the theatres in the benchmark pool fell into three distinct categories:
 - Theatres that characterize community involvement in terms of youth programming and some measure of collaboration with local non-profit arts groups.
 - Theatres where community involvement comes primarily through rentals of theatre space by community entities such as local businesses or high schools having a graduation.
 - Theatres which have no significant community interaction.
- For most theatres interviewed, community involvement comes in the second form, offering rental space to groups within the local community.
- The model for the highest level of community involvement comes from the Apollo Theatre in New York, which offers:
 - The Apollo Academy where theatrical professionals lecture about their work in local schools.
 - A theatre tour program which brings students through the theatre as part of their history curriculum.
 - Shows first-run movies to local children for free in partnership with AOL/Time Warner.
- The Merrimack Repertory of Lowell, MA also has significant community involvement including:
 - Educational programming for children grades 1-12.
 - Low cost, off-season rentals to local arts non-profits.
 - Actively seeking to collaborate with local arts non-profits.
- The privately owned Forrest Theatre of Philadelphia has no community interaction

Surrounding Area

- Theatres that see their surrounding area as an asset listed an area with elements such as:
 - Multiple restaurants and upscale bars
 - Shopping opportunities
 - Ample, user-friendly parking
 - Public transportation access
- Theatres that see their surrounding area as a challenge listed an area with elements such as:
 - A sense of being outside the downtown area
 - Inadequate street-lighting and a perception of danger
 - A lack of safe walkways isolated from dense or high-speed automobile traffic

Relationships

- With the exception of the university-owned Columbia Theater, all the non-profit theatres in the benchmark reported working to maintain strong ties with the local arts community and the city government.
- All the non-profits believe that having a good relationship with the city and local arts groups is crucial to success.
- The Paramount Center of Bristol, TN, “tries to give them [local artists] what they want when they’re here.”
- The Merrimack Repertory Company actively supports and collaborates with local arts groups
- The Apollo devotes 40% of its stage time to community rentals.
- The Paramount, Merrimack and Apollo have good relationships with their host cities and are seen as an asset by local government.
- The only theatre operating without any involvement from the city or local arts community is the privately owned Forrest Theatre.

Board and Staff Composition

- Despite differences in size, theatres with boards of directors said that a board must be composed of members who:
 - Bring the skills and resources of a particular type that is need e.g. fundraising, marketing, legal expertise or technical expertise.
 - Are able to serve as ambassadors to the surrounding community.
 - Have at least a working knowledge of the artistic and technical sides of theatre.
- For non-profit theatres staffing patterns were similar:
 - Artistic directors and executive directors work closely together to develop programming.
 - Full-time administrative staff is as small as possible to ensure smooth operation.
 - Large volunteer groups, as high as three hundred in one case, are used to provide office support, ushering and extra manpower during large, special events.
- The Merrimack Repertory Theater offers a unique package to employees in which they are placed in theatre owned housing rented at below-market prices. This allows MRT to pay lower salaries and still attract highly qualified personnel.

Financials

- For the interviewed non-profit theatres, the years since 2001 have seen reduced audiences, decreased funding from corporations and private donors, and rising costs.
- Only the Paramount and Merrimack Repertory Theater released financial data, but even this limited data presented a challenged outlook.
- Those non-profit theatres that were willing to discuss their financial situation revealed themselves to be in areas with moderate to low potential where they were forced to compete with other equally worthy causes.

Best Practices

- For Boards of Directors:
 - Composed of individuals who address a particular given need of the theatre.
 - Composed of individuals who bring a specific expertise and potential connection to marketing, fundraising or legal services.
 - Composed of community members and people who understand and can serve as ambassadors to the community.
- For Executive Directors:
 - Skilled managers, capable of working with the board, staff and community.
 - A person who brings strong business, people and fundraising skills to the table.
 - Willing to do the “grunt work” of the theatre if need be.
 - A person who works well with and understands not just the local community but the surrounding area.
- For Staff:
 - As small as possible to facilitate smooth operation of the theatre.
 - Makes use of volunteers for high volume activities.
- For Theatres:
 - Have a mission which everyone in the organization understands and adheres to.
 - Find your programming niche and make yourself known for it, especially in a large city with many competing theatres.

Implications for the Strand Theatre

- As a non-profit theatre with a community mission, the Strand will need to fundraise for operations annually.
- The Strand will need a capable, visionary, and aggressive leader with strong business skills and a willingness to roll up their sleeves.
- The Strand will need a board which addresses the specific needs of the theatre and is capable of and willing to serve as community ambassadors. This includes fundraising support.
- The Strand will need the smallest paid staff possible and will have to use volunteer labor.
- The Strand should program in such a way as to bring in both neighborhood and regional audiences.